



Educating California's Foster Youth

The policies, procedures and practices affecting
the education of youth residing in group homes

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What You Should Know About Education and Foster Youth

More than 500,000 children under age 18 are growing up in foster care in America.¹ Of these, one in five — more than 100,000 boys and girls — live in California.² These young people are highly vulnerable, and their extraordinary needs challenge the resources and creativity of the governmental agencies responsible for their well-being.

In March 2003, the California Department of Education (CDE) released a report titled *Policies, Procedures and Practices Affecting the Education of Children Residing in Group Homes*.³ The purpose of this study was twofold:

- ≡ To address concerns about the state's system for funding educational services for youth living in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes and to recommend an alternative funding approach.
- ≡ To address problems with the system for determining the educational placement of foster youth, especially foster youth residing in group homes, and to develop options for improving services.

To prepare the report, a research team from the American Institutes for Research analyzed state data; interviewed state and county agency staff, foster youth, group home operators, case workers, school staff and others; reviewed state- and county-level documents; held numerous meetings with two stakeholder groups; held focus groups; and tracked the educational and residential history of youth residing in group homes over a one-year period.

Much More To Do

Despite considerable expenditures, a complex bureaucracy, and a vast network of residential and schooling options, research suggests that, as a nation, we are poorly preparing youth in foster care for adulthood. For example, a 1998 study of young people leaving the foster care system at age 18 found that within 12–18 months

- ≡ 37 percent had not finished high school,
- ≡ 39 percent were unemployed,
- ≡ 27 percent of males and 10 percent of females had been incarcerated at least once, and
- ≡ 39 percent were receiving public assistance.

Source: Courtney & Piliavin, 1998

¹ Weinberg et al., 2001

² Morena, 2001

³ The full report of this state Legislature-mandated study can be found at www.cde.ca.gov/fasdiv/fiscalpolicy/polprorft.htm.

This summary outlines key findings and recommendations from this research for policymakers and the public.

About the Issue: Facts and Context

Children are placed in foster care as dependents of the state due to parental abuse or neglect or as wards of the state after violating the law. Group homes that serve six or more young people (also called Licensed Children's Institutions or LCIs) are one of a range of residential options for children in foster care. Other options include placement with relatives, in foster family homes and in foster family agency homes that serve fewer than six children. While young people living in group homes are a small percentage of children in foster care, their needs tend to be extensive.

Like other children, youth in foster care may attend local public schools or, in some cases, a specialized school known as a "nonpublic" school. On average, it costs more to educate students in nonpublic schools versus public schools.

Nonpublic schools serve only special education students. Usually, it is a school district that refers a student to a nonpublic school. In some instances, a group home operator may oversee an adjoining nonpublic school, and all of the residents of the group home may attend this nonpublic school. An earlier study, *Education of Foster Group Home Children: Whose Responsibility Is It?* (Parrish et al., 2001)⁴, found that approximately one-half of youth living in group homes receive special education services, with one-fourth being educated in nonpublic schools.

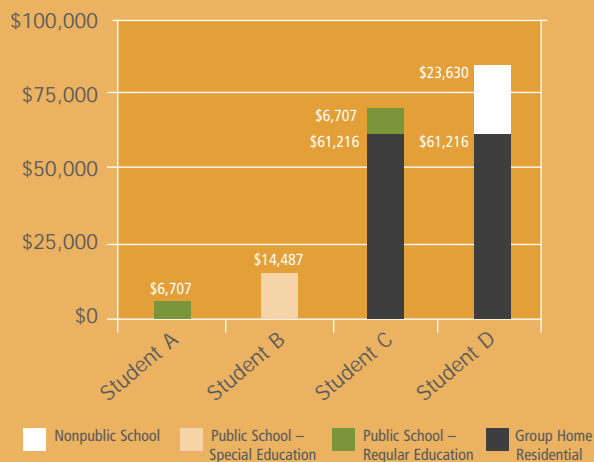
California spends between \$65,000 and \$85,000, and sometimes more than \$150,000, annually to house and educate a single foster youth in a group home.

Key Findings of the Study

California has a flawed system for funding educational services for youth living in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes. Specifically, the system contains fiscal incentives to place youth residing in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes into special education programs provided by nonpublic schools.

⁴ This prior report on youth in group homes can be found at www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/ssp/fysp_index.html.

Estimated Average Annual Expenditures for All Students and Those Residing in Group Homes⁵



The first two bars in this chart show estimates of annual public spending for two students residing at home and attending public schools. Estimated average public expenditures for general education student A and special education student B are \$6,707 and \$14,487, respectively.

The second two bars are for students residing in group homes. Student C lives in a group home, is educated in a public school and is not in special education, for a total public cost of \$67,923. This includes the \$61,216 average group home residential cost from the sample of students included in this study, as well as the average public school cost of \$6,707 shown above. Student D lives in a group home and is educated in a nonpublic school at a total public cost of \$84,846. This includes \$61,216 average group home residential cost listed above, as well as the average nonpublic school cost from the sample of students studied of \$23,630.

While nonpublic schools may be appropriate for limited periods of time for youth with serious emotional disturbances or highly specialized needs, these schools can isolate youth from their non-special education peers and generally fail to provide full access to the state curriculum. The study recommends an alternative funding approach that is fiscally neutral with regard to educational placement.

The system for ensuring high-quality, appropriate educational services for youth residing in group homes has a number of problems. In addition to fiscal incentives to place students in nonpublic schools, shortcomings include insufficient standards for certification and limited oversight of nonpublic schools, lack of clear accountability for educational outcomes, instability of school placements, and inadequate interagency communication and cooperation. The study recommends a child-centered system responsive to the voices of youth in foster care, in which primary responsibility for education is assigned clearly to education agencies and in which interagency collaboration is improved substantially.

⁵ Public school expenditure estimates come from the national Special Education Expenditure Project study (www.csef-air.org) and are not directly comparable to figures developed by the California Department of Education. Group home and nonpublic school estimates were taken from the sample of students used for this study.

A Road Map for Change

For young people in foster care, the road to a better future begins with a quality education. Their basic educational needs are similar to those of every child:

- ≡ stable, continuous and uninterrupted education;
- ≡ immediate enrollment in school if a move is necessary;
- ≡ appropriate school placement in a high-quality program according to the unique needs of each youth;
- ≡ full records for each youth fully available to all service providers who need access to them;
- ≡ clear lines of responsibility and accountability to ensure educational advancement; and
- ≡ opportunity to express his or her views in regard to educational placement and needs.

Ultimate responsibility for the education of youth in foster care must lie with state and local education agencies. The study identifies strategies that should be implemented at each level to improve the education offered to youth in foster care so that their basic educational needs are met.

Fiscal support for these activities will be needed at both the state and local levels.

Five Concerns About the Current System and What Can Be Done About Them

Based on its key findings, the study identifies five specific concerns about California's existing policies and practices, and it recommends strategies for addressing them.

Concern #1: School districts have strong financial incentives to place foster youth residing in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes into special education programs provided by nonpublic schools.

When youth living in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes receive special education services in *public* schools, school districts receive no additional funds from the state. However, under most circumstances, when these services are provided to foster youth by a *nonpublic* school or agency, school districts receive 100 percent reimbursement from the state. For example, in the chart on page 3, a school district would receive 100 percent funding from the state for the \$23,630 cost of educating Student D in a nonpublic school, but would not receive funding beyond basic state aid if these same services were provided by the district.

Even when the costs of public and nonpublic special education services are similar, school districts receive additional funds, beyond basic state education funding, from the state only for those services provided by a nonpublic school or agency. As a result, school districts have clear incentives to identify young people in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes as being in need of special education and to have the special education services provided by a nonpublic school or agency. This, in turn, presents several problems.

- ≡ First, it violates federal law requiring all youth in special education to receive services in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs, including the opportunity, as appropriate, to interact with and receive the same educational experiences as nondisabled youth.⁶

⁶ Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Public policies should result in equal opportunities for public or nonpublic placement for these youth, coupled with appropriate monitoring and oversight, to ensure that all foster youth are served in the least restrictive setting appropriate to their needs.

- ≡ Second, under the current nonpublic school funding system, school districts have little incentive to control costs. Also, under the present system in which the funds are provided under state rather than local control, school districts may feel less responsibility and limited accountability to oversee services and educational outcomes for nonpublic school students.

Recommendation: Resolve the funding issue.

To move away from fiscal incentives that favor nonpublic schools and agencies, the study proposes a funding approach that is independent of whether youth residing in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes receive services from public or nonpublic providers.

In the recommended approach, funds would be allocated based on the number of foster care beds within a designated area. This alternative provides a decentralized and flexible approach. The flexibility would encourage some school districts to boost the availability of public programs for this population.

This approach would forestall problems such as those faced by Sweetwater Union School District when the nonpublic school in the district suddenly closed. Although the school district stepped in to provide education to all of the youth once served by the nonpublic school, the school district was not reimbursed by the state for providing these services as the nonpublic school had been. The recommended funding approach would make funds available to school districts to encourage appropriate programs that best meet the educational needs of youth in group homes, foster family homes and foster family agency homes.

Funding changes alone, of course, will not resolve all of the fiscal issues associated with the education of this population. For example, many youth in foster care are

not eligible for special education but often could benefit from specialized education services, such as counseling, tutoring or behavior management. The study recommends that the state maximize the amount of federal funds that are available to serve this population.

Improvements in accountability also are recommended to allow this alternative funding system to succeed. Without strong accountability measures, even an improved funding approach could result in an overall decline in the number and quality of education services available to youth in foster care.

Concern #2: Standards for and oversight of nonpublic schools are inadequate.

The study found the state standards for certification as a nonpublic school and the monitoring process for these schools to be substantially weaker than standards and monitoring for public schools. For example, to obtain certification currently, nonpublic schools must have just one credentialed teacher *per school*, regardless of the total number of students served, while public schools must have credentialed teachers for every class. The study

also found that the current review process for nonpublic schools, involving site visits every four years, is insufficient.

Recommendation: Raise standards for certification as a nonpublic school so they equal or exceed those of public schools.

The study recommends that CDE identify legal changes needed to strengthen the certification process for nonpublic schools. The certification standards should be rigorous and made at least comparable to those that apply to public schools.

Recommendation: Improve monitoring of nonpublic schools.

Additional resources should be devoted to monitoring these specialized and costly nonpublic school placements. Policymakers should consider applying the same monitoring procedures used for public programs to nonpublic schools, bringing the monitoring and oversight of these two types of placements more closely in line.

Monitoring the schools should be primarily the responsibility of the state. However, school districts should be accountable for the quality and appropriateness of services

provided by nonpublic schools to individual students for whom the school districts are responsible.

Concern #3: Accountability for educational outcomes is vague or missing.

While the state, counties and school districts should each be accountable for educating foster youth, measures to assign and enforce specific responsibilities currently are lacking. Coupled with the poor educational outcomes of these state-protected youth and the ensuing cost to the state in the form of reduced income and ongoing need for social services, the lack of clear oversight for the education of these youth seems fiscally and morally indefensible.

Although other agencies also must play a role in the education of these youth, the expertise and ultimate responsibility must reside within the education sector. The high cost associated with housing and schooling youth in foster care seems to demand special state oversight, if only from a fiscal accountability perspective.

Recommendation: *Increase accountability of education agencies.*

Accountability should be improved in several ways.

- ≡ First, school districts should be required to report on outcomes for each of their students residing in group homes, foster family homes or foster family agency homes. These reports should be shared with a liaison, who would be charged with monitoring the education plans for each youth. This reporting would include the student's educational goals and objectives, the educational program that is in place, the student's progress, and credits accrued toward graduation.
- ≡ Second, the Academic Performance Index (API) should be adjusted so that the results for youth in foster care can be identified in the same way as results for youth in special education. This would allow educators to examine trends for this population and determine better ways to serve youth in foster care. It is essential for the state and local school systems to be held accountable for the educational outcomes of this population.

- ≡ Finally, independent oversight boards should be created at the state and county levels. The state board would hold the responsible agencies accountable for high-quality education services for youth in foster care and report annually to the Legislature. The county boards would report to their county boards of supervisors in the same way that the state oversight board would report to the Legislature. Expanding the Office of the California State Ombudsman for Foster Care and ensuring that the ombudsman is appointed by and reports to the Legislature about the status and progress of youth in foster care also would greatly improve the state's oversight ability.

Concern #4: For many foster children, schooling lacks continuity.

For many youth living in group homes, frequent transfers from school to school are a major barrier to quality education. Most often, these school transfers are related to changes in residential placement.

Of the 51 youth residing in group homes who were interviewed for this study, only 37 percent reported that they had stayed at the same school the past year, whereas 61 percent said they had attended two or more schools.⁷ A school transfer often involves a delay of days or weeks before a student can enroll in the new school. Once enrolled, the young person must adapt to new classes, rules and social mores, a challenge that inevitably affects educational progress.

Recommendation: Grant foster youth benefits similar to those of homeless students.

Federal legislation passed to protect the educational rights of homeless youth should be used as a model for legislation that would offer similar benefits to youth in foster care.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in December 2001, ensures educational rights and protections for children and youth

⁷ Two percent of the youth interviewed did not know how many schools they had attended in the past year.

experiencing homelessness. Two provisions are of particular relevance to this issue:

- ≡ First, the act requires school districts, to the extent feasible, to keep students in their schools of origin regardless of their current residence unless doing so is against the wishes of the youth's parent or guardian. The state and school districts must ensure that the student receives transportation to the school of origin.
- ≡ Second, if it is in the best interest of the youth to enroll in a new school, that school must *immediately* enroll the youth, even if the youth lacks records normally required for enrollment, such as medical records, previous academic records or proof of residency.

California can greatly minimize the impact of school changes on foster youth by extending them similar guarantees.

Recommendation: *Require schools to grant partial credits.*

Most public schools do not accept or award partial credits for partially completed semesters. Yet many youth who live in group homes change schools in the middle of a semester, moving from one regular public school to another or moving from a court, community or nonpublic school to a regular public school or vice versa.

Sixty-nine percent of the youth living in group homes who were studied said they had changed schools in the middle of the year at some point during their tenure in the foster care system. As a result, these students lose credits for work completed and may be forced to retake courses they already have partially finished.

Concern #5: Interagency communication and cooperation needs to improve.

Providing an appropriate education to youth in foster care will succeed only if all responsible agencies communicate and cooperate in providing for basic needs, such as education, health, shelter and safety. Despite the interconnected and often overlapping nature of these

services, agencies that provide them have insufficient mechanisms for coordinating how they provide the services to youth in foster care.

Recommendation: *Create a statewide data system.*

California should move forward with its long-discussed plan of creating an education passport for youth in foster care. The passport would contain an ongoing record of education services received by each youth in foster care statewide, along with that student's education status and other data needed for enrollment, such as immunizations. Although provisions for such information currently exist within the foster care data system maintained by the State Department of Social Services, these data fields currently contain little information and are generally not available to education agencies.

To ensure that information is immediately accessible to service providers as needed, the state should create a single, statewide, Web-based system that would allow access to all service providers involved. In the absence of state action, some California counties are creating local systems, often

at considerable cost, that are not applicable statewide. Given the high mobility of many youth in foster care, these local systems will fail to address this statewide information problem.

Recommendation: *Establish interagency working groups.*

To facilitate interagency cooperation and communication, the state and counties should establish interagency working groups on the education of youth in foster care.

The state-level interagency working group should address cross-agency issues affecting the education of youth in foster care. At the county level, these groups should resolve specific educational problems confronting individual students, as well as a broader range of issues relating to the need for interagency communication and coordination. These county groups should serve as conduits for communication to and from the state interagency working group.

Current and former foster youth should serve on these working groups, to the extent appropriate, to increase the voice of youth in the system.

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